

A Tribute to John MacArthur (1939–2025)

By Tom Pennington

Our Personal History

My first exposure to John and his ministry was in January 1984. I was in seminary and a graduate assistant. One night while studying in my office, I came across *Grace to You* on a Gaffney, South Carolina, radio station. John was preaching on Romans 8. I was so captivated by the way he explained the truth that I immediately called and ordered the study guide entitled *Security in the Spirit*. After that, I made it a point to be in my office most evenings so I could listen to the broadcast. His respect for and carefulness in handling God's Word, his obvious love for Jesus Christ, and our shared doctrinal convictions united my heart to his. I could never have imagined then how the Lord in His providence would weave our lives together.

In the summer of 1987, Sheila and I decided to move to Los Angeles, solely to be a part of Grace Community Church. In early September we arrived—without having visited and without jobs—eager to see what a living, vibrant New Testament church looked like. From the first Lord's Day, we were never disappointed. We finally felt at home.

Within a week and a half of our arrival, I was working at *Grace to You*. I was only twenty-six at the time. During my first week as a lowly study-guide editor, John stopped by my office and talked for thirty minutes about a theological issue. A relationship was born that would later grow into a friendship.

Four years—and several different roles—later, in 1991, John (and Phil Johnson) took a massive risk and asked me to serve as the Managing Director of *Grace to You*. I was only thirty-one. The nine years I served in that role were wonderfully rich, including regular interactions with John. In the mid-90's, I became an elder at Grace Church. Our paths crossed even more, and our relationship grew.

But on July 20, 1999, our relationship took an unexpected turn. That's the day I told John I was planning to leave to pursue the pastorate. And that's also the day he asked me to serve

alongside him as his associate. For four years, I served as the senior associate pastor of Grace Church and as his personal assistant. They were some of the most challenging and rewarding years of my life.

We spoke often, enjoyed many meals together, and traveled all over the world in ministry. We even played golf together—a game he loved but that stretched my own sanctification. He and Patricia came to the hospital after the births of each of our three daughters. He visited each of Sheila's parents as they lay dying at home. A deep friendship formed in those years.

Then, in October 2003, I left Grace Church and moved to Dallas to be the pastor of Countryside Bible Church. A few weeks later, John preached at my installation service.¹ During the 22 years since, we have spoken in each other's churches and in various conferences together, including the Shepherds Conference. He graciously invited me to serve with him for many years on the boards of *Grace to You* and The Master's University and Seminary. We often texted and spoke by phone.

At various times in our relationship of nearly 40 years, John was my pastor, boss, and fellow elder. But he was always my mentor, spiritual father, and friend. Most of what I know about preaching, and all I know about the church, I learned from his faithful exposition of the Scripture.

Lessons We All Learned from John

The impact of John's life and ministry is impossible to distill into a few short paragraphs, but there are profound lessons he taught all of us who were privileged to serve with him. We still carry those lessons with us and always will. Many of these same lessons have also profoundly affected the leaders and members of my church, along with thousands of other pastors and millions of other church members around the world.

He taught us to truly believe in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Through his teaching, both public and private, he instilled in us an unwavering confidence in the Word of God. Scripture is foundational—and final. To drive this point home, his classic message was on

¹ John MacArthur, "The Man of God (1 Tim. 6:11–14)," Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas, October 26, 2003, <https://countrysidebible.org/sermons/20031026a-115969>.

Psalm 19. I can still hear him frequently restating Spurgeon's famous words: "You don't need to defend the Bible. The Bible is like a lion—just open the cage and let it out. It'll take care of itself."

But his confidence in Scripture wasn't only taught; more importantly, it was modeled. He gave himself to a lifetime of expository preaching, spending 30 hours a week in study—an example many of us have sought to imitate. Often, I still hear his voice saying, "There's no secret to a long-term, successful preaching ministry. Just keep your rear in the chair until the work is done." I remember many conversations in which he shared his struggle to understand the biblical text he was studying for Sunday. He wrestled with the text like Luther, "beating upon it importunately" until its meaning emerged. And in the weeks after he preached that passage, I watched as he quietly sought to live it.

The heartbeat of John's ministry always centered on three great truths: the beauty of Christ, the glory of the gospel of grace, and the sufficiency of Scripture. He taught us that the truth is worth fighting for and that if you love truth, you will hate error. We watched him stand firm with conviction and courage in theological controversies—from Charismatic theology to the Lordship debate, from the inroads of secular psychology to church pragmatism, and from the battle against evolution to the Truth War. And through it all, we learned to treat the Word of God with the same reverence and respect due God Himself.

He also taught us to have a high view of God—to lift Him high in our thinking, our ministries, and especially in the church's corporate worship. Against a current of man-centered trends, John called us to be thoroughly God-centered. He modeled for us how to treat God before our congregations—that God is good, but He is not safe. He is to be feared and honored. John taught us the delicate biblical balance between God's immanence and transcendence, that He is to be loved as our Father and feared as our King. The elusive balance between what Kidner once called "the poles of awe and intimacy" was present in John's every service, every sermon, every prayer.

He relentlessly defended and demonstrated the biblical mandate of expository preaching. By the middle of the twentieth century, expository preaching had become nearly extinct. Topical preaching had become the predominant evangelical model. In God's

providence, a new wave of interest in the Scripture, along with the publishing of new Bible translations, created a renewed interest in learning the Bible. Strongly influenced by the example of his father, Dr. Jack MacArthur, and his mentor, Dr. Paul Feinberg, John left seminary committed to verse-by-verse exposition. In his 55-year ministry at Grace Church, John preached over 3,500 sermons—the vast majority were faithful expositions of a biblical text.

And through his own teaching and example, John played a huge role in the recovery of the consecutive exposition of God's Word in the church across the world. He had a contagious confidence in the Scripture. People sometimes ask me the most important lesson I learned at Grace Church under John. My answer is always the same: you can trust the Holy Spirit to use His Word to perfect His work in every life. As pastors, we are called to be faithful stewards of God's Word. Our job is to read the Word, explain the Word, and apply the Word (1 Tim. 4:13). As John so often expressed it, "We're not the chef but the waiter. Our job is just to get the food to the table without messing it up."

He spent his entire life defining and defending the biblical gospel. Many who benefited from John's ministry first learned of him by reading his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*, a biblical response to the no-lordship attack on the gospel. From his first sermon as pastor of Grace Church in 1969, a message entitled *How to Play Church*, he spent his entire ministry defending the biblical gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether its enemies were antinomians or legalists, Arminians or hyper-Calvinists, old-line liberals or contemporary postmodernists, John refused to countenance faith without repentance or justification without sanctification. He simply would not let go of the breathtaking biblical gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone based on the work of Christ alone. His commitment to the gospel was not that of a detached academic who parsed the truth for others but of a redeemed sinner overwhelmed by the beauty of Jesus Christ.

He taught and modeled the biblical doctrine of the church. I attended a couple good churches while in seminary, but I had never belonged to a thoroughly New Testament church. That's what I witnessed at Grace Community. There, I learned firsthand the biblical mandate of a plurality of qualified and gifted elders leading Christ's church and every Christian in the church serving, using his or her gift to minister to the body. His sermon series, *The Anatomy of the Church* and the corresponding book, *Shepherdology*, permanently reshaped my view of the

church into that clearly taught in Scripture and beautifully modeled at Grace—which became my home church.

He taught us to be patient and gracious with people. I will never forget a conversation we had one day over pizza in the nearby city of La Cañada, near where John had his first job. I asked him what he thought was the biggest mistake spiritual leaders make. He answered without hesitation: “That’s easy—being impatient with people. Not giving them time to grow.”

And it was exactly the virtue of patience he consistently modeled. I overheard many conversations in the front of the church when he was dealing with those who were terribly confused or even there to “correct” him. I listened as some dear believer asked the same question that they had heard him answer countless times before. In those conversations, John always embodied patience and grace, answered their questions, and then directed them to some resource, often paid for at his own expense. Many of us on the pastoral staff frequently arrived at the hospital to visit a member, only to learn that he and Patricia had already been there.

One day in a pastoral staff meeting, John was reading a manuscript and seemed disengaged from the conversation—we knew he never was—about a church member with struggles. It soon became clear he was tracking with the conversation when he looked up and said, “Everybody’s got baggage. If you don’t have baggage, you’re not going anywhere.”

On the one hand, John was courageous about the truth. He could go on live television in front of an audience of millions and answer Larry King’s question and tell him graciously that if he died without Christ, he would go to hell. But at the same time, he was so gracious that he simply could not say no to a personal request. And he really found it difficult to deliver any kind of bad news to anyone. During the years I served with him, he regularly modeled the balance of truth and love that I long to show with those God has given me to shepherd.

He showed us how to walk humbly. I’m still learning this lesson, but I had the opportunity for many years to see in John what real humility looks like. I worked in Christian radio for twelve years and encountered many well-known teachers and leaders. Sadly, there were many occasions when I witnessed pride and self-promotion at their ugliest. But I found John’s

down-to-earth view of himself refreshing. He was genuinely unimpressed with himself and his own success.

As I have already shared, in my first week at *Grace to You*, he stopped by my small office and talked with me for half an hour. That's not the way a proud man acts. He routinely gave the credit for his success to others who served with him, deflecting the praise and pointing instead to God's providence and gracious gifting.

He hated the thought of being or even appearing to be a prima donna. I remember a trip to Denver for a radio rally when the last rental car available was a huge Cadillac. John was so concerned about the message that would send and so uncomfortable with anything ostentatious, he made the driver stop several blocks from the church—and he, his wife Patricia, and I walked the rest of the way to the church in the snow and cold.

Perhaps the greatest expression of his humility was the way he often sought the counsel and opinion of those of us around him and genuinely listened to our perspective. He didn't treat us like subordinates but consistently as co-workers and friends. That kind of humility is rare and unforgettable.

Finally, he taught us the importance of personal integrity. John was not a perfect man. He would not want anyone to think he was. But having seen him in both public and private settings in various circumstances all over the world, I can tell you that he consistently demonstrated the same integrity in private as he did in the pulpit. In fact, one of his daughters told me that over the last two and a half years, as John struggled with pain, major health issues, and multiple surgeries, he never *once* complained to his family but regularly expressed his gratitude for their care.

I had the privilege of working closely with John for sixteen years and knowing him for nearly forty. In all that time, he displayed the same integrity—whether in front of thousands or alone, whether on stage or behind closed doors, whether in his community or on the other side of the world. I never once saw a contradiction between his private and public life. He wasn't perfect. But in him, I saw real integrity—he was exactly what he appeared to be. And that is a great gift to us all.

One passage sums up the life and lessons John MacArthur taught me and all of us. It's a passage that he loved and preached at my installation twenty-two years ago. First Timothy 6:11–16 says, "Flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.... Keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ... who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light.... To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen." To the extent any of us who served with John can be described by those words, it is only because we walk in his footsteps.

Our Last Goodbye

In God's amazing goodness and providence, and thanks to the overwhelmingly gracious invitation of one of his family members, two days before John's death, I had the privilege to be with him one last time. He was in the ICU but mentally alert and as sharp as ever. It was such a sweet time. As I sat next to his bed, he reached out and grabbed my hand with his usual firm grip, and he held it through my entire time with him, punctuating my comments or prayer with an extra squeeze as if to say "Amen" or "I agree."

I wanted to share my heart with him, but I also knew God had given me a special privilege and that I was speaking on behalf of thousands of others who would love to have that opportunity. I told him clearly and at length how much I loved him, how grateful I was for him, and how much his life and ministry have indelibly marked my own. I told him I stand on his shoulders every day of my life.

I prayed with him and rehearsed biblical truths he knew better than I did. I reminded him that although his pain and suffering over the last two and a half years did not seem temporary or light, Paul says that they were. And those trials were producing an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. I reminded him of Revelation 1:18, where our Lord said, "I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades." That meant that John's impending death would happen not as the end of a random medical process but as the personal decision of Jesus Christ Himself.

It was such a wonderful time, but as I started to leave, I knew it was a final goodbye. With a full heart, I said, "John, we're not going to see each other again in this life. But know that I love you, and we will soon be reunited in our Lord's presence forever." He was on oxygen and couldn't speak, but his last message to me was an enthusiastic thumbs up.

Finally Home

John is finally home. In a day filled with moral failure, compromise, and defection, we needed someone to show us how to finish well. And by God's grace, he did.

I will never forget or cease to be grateful for the investment John made in me. My own father died in 1984, so he was like a second father. It was also my profound privilege to be one of his Timothys, and my life and ministry will always bear the imprint of his own. In addition, I was blessed to call him my friend. For those reasons—and others too numerous to express—I am profoundly grateful to God and will always be deeply grateful to John as well.

John, I love you and thank God in my every remembrance of you. You will always remain in my heart. I look forward to seeing you again soon.